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ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine whether school boards from central region states with aggressive legislative education reform initiatives differ from school boards from nonreform states. Reform states, defined as states that have enacted statewide choice legislation, included Ohio, Minnesota, and Iowa. Nonreform states were Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri. The study described school board members based on the perceptions of school board presidents and explained differences between school board presidents from reform and nonreform states based on common legally mandated learning areas, sources of learning, group dimensions, and other demographics. The study found that school boards from reform and nonreform states do not differ with respect to learning, group relations, educational reform, district wealth, district size, or school board size. School board members learned to do their jobs primarily from the district superintendent or on the job. School board presidents were interested more in learning how to do their jobs and the impact of reform than they were about group relations. Recommendations are provided for school board members, superintendents, legislators, and other school personnel. (Contains 23 references.) (JDD)

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Learning Needs of School Board Presidents In the Central Region

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Running head: LEARNING NEEDS OF SCHOOL BOARD PRESIDENTS IN THE CENTRAL REGION

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Learning Needs Of School Board Presidents In The Central Region

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Introduction

Control of American education is vested at the local level in the legal and policymaking functions of local school boards. While control of American public education is vested in school boards at the local level, the source of a school board's authority in this regard is derived from plenary powers of state legislatures. The plenary powers of state legislatures regarding education have been upheld in several judicial rulings such as *Epperson vs. Arkansas, 1968*. Through state constitutions, statutes, regulations and judicial rulings, education has evolved as a state-local partnership designed to oversee common interests of states while maintaining diversity through local control. School boards control American education as agencies of the state and are created and designed to operate at the pleasure of state legislatures. Therefore, school boards are charged with carrying forward legal prescriptions of state law and instituting educational policies consistent with those prescriptions.

Generally, school boards are elected from local constituents in popularly held elections. The election of school boards through popularly held elections tends to place control of education in the hands of laymen rather than professional educators. Because of this practice, there is concern whether these laymen possess the experience necessary to advance quality educational programs. Presently, the percentage of school board members who are elected to school board service through popularly held elections stands at 94.3 percent (Hatrick, Underwood, Fortune, and Keough, 1989). Some argue that this process of credentialing school boards through

popularly held elections is counter-productive because it provides ineffective leadership and places schools at risk at a time when schools are called upon to exert considerable influence on the continued forward progress of our nation toward the future. Others argue that school boards elected by popular vote keeps total control of schools out of the hands of a professional elite who often have little concern for pluralist or populist ideals. Thus, the ballot box serves to check and balance both elitist and pluralist notions about how the American educational system is run and whom it should serve.

Problem

Because of the political orientation of school board members, much school board learning is politically motivated. With recent moves on the part of state legislatures to restructure schools in favor of prevailing realities, many education leaders, including school board members, are faced with new challenges and have embarked upon new initiatives in search of relevant knowledge to enhance school responsiveness and accountability. There is some evidence that school boards in states with aggressive legislative education reform initiatives are becoming increasingly concerned with how to manage the diversity of change. In Ohio, for example, some boards, in opposition to that state's open enrollment provisions filed legal suits while others remain supportive and express interest in working with legislators to rethink financial structures so that equal opportunity in education program and finance might be optimized. The purpose of this study is to

determine whether school boards from reform states differ from school boards from nonreform states.

Objectives

The study was designed to achieve the stated purpose by satisfying three objectives. The objectives of the study were to describe school board members based on the perceptions of school board presidents and to explain differences between school board presidents from reform and nonreform states in the central region by: (a) describing school board members in terms of race, education, age, income, and learning sources; (b) exploring and describing school board presidents with regard to issues of greatest concern within key learning areas, group relations, and education reform; and (c) predicting whether a school board president is from a reform or a nonreform state based on legal areas of learning, areas where learning is needed, time for learning, group dimensions (polarization and viscidity), district wealth, district size, and school board size.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

Two research questions were asked and a single research hypothesis posited to satisfy the state objectives. The first research question, "What is the social composition of school board members from reform and nonreform states based on perceptions of school board presidents." The second research question is, "Do school board presidents from reform and nonreform states differ with regard to issues of greatest concern in the areas of learning, group relations, and education reform?"

The research hypothesis is that there is no difference between the perceptions of school board presidents in reform and nonreform states on legal areas of learning, areas where additional learning is required, the time it takes to learn in the legal areas, issues of greatest concern, and group dimensions.

Population

The target population consisted of school board members in the states of Ohio, Minnesota, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa, and Missouri. The accessible population consisted of school board presidents representing all school districts in each of eight states. Based upon responses from school board presidents, findings are generalized to school board members in states of the central region only. The fact that responses are sought from school board presidents who may or may not be in a position to objectively describe other school board members, constituted a limitation for this study. It is assumed that board presidents are in a position to objectively describe other school board members.

Definition of Terms

Reform states are states in the central region that have enacted statewide choice legislation. Nonreform states are states which have not enacted choice legislation, have defeated such legislation, or have legislation conducted on a limited basis only in selected cities. For instance, Illinois is considered a nonreform state although special reform legislation exists for the city of Chicago. Reform states in the central region are Ohio, Minnesota, and Iowa. Nonreform states are Wisconsin, Michigan, Indiana,

Illinois, and Missouri. District wealth is a function of per pupil assessed valuation. District size is total student enrollment determined by average daily membership (ADM) or average daily attendance (ADA) depending on the method used in each of the eight states.

Legal areas of school board learning are those legal components specifically outlined and mandated in state statutes and are presumed to be the primary areas of school board learning. From a gleaning of each state's statutes, 15 common learning areas were abstracted. These 15 common areas are the legally mandated learning areas under study. Common learning areas are legally mandated areas which appear in at least 5 of the 8 state statutes being studied.

Legal authority for school board members may be located in each state's legal codes. For each state surveyed, state education codes and citations are as follows: (a) Ohio–Ohio Revised Code (O.R.C., 1990); (b) Minnesota–Minnesota Statutes (M.S.A., 1960); (c) Indiana–West's Annotated Indiana Statutes (W.A.I.C., 1984); (d) Illinois–Smith-Hurd Illinois Annotated Statutes (I.A.S., 1989, 1990); (e) Michigan–Michigan Compiled Laws Annotated (M.C.L.A., 1988); (f) Wisconsin–West's Wisconsin Statutes Annotated (W.S.A., 1973); (g) Iowa–Iowa Code Annotated (I.C.A., 1988); and (h) Missouri–Vernon's Annotated Missouri Statutes (V.A.M.S., 1965).

School board members learn their jobs from several sources including (a) on the job, (b) following the lead of others (c) other school board members, (d) the superintendent, (e) prior experience, (f) conferences and conventions, and (g) written public documents.

The Group Dimensions questionnaire classifies group characteristics into 13 dimensions. These dimensions are autonomy, control, flexibility, hedonic tone, homogeneity, intimacy, participation, permeability, polarization, potency, stability, stratification, and viscidity (Hemphill, 1956). While generally all 13 dimensions are used to classify groups, only two (polarization and viscidity) were found to be significantly different for groups in this study.

Significance

Given the current concern for reform in education and the presumed need to restructure schools in face of changing social, economic, and political realities, practitioners and educators are called to reflect on governance structures of schools and school districts as they presently exist. In reflecting on governance structures, careful attention is being given to the areas of learning thought to be significant by those vested with legal control–boards of education–and the quality of interaction these critical players display, among themselves and between others, as they exercise their powers and authority in the management of schools and school districts. By looking carefully at those who control and manage schools, concerned educators may be inclined to develop more responsible leadership through cooperation and a better understanding of the unique dispositions of those in charge. Understanding these significant areas of learning and the quality of relationships of boards of education is of significance to school boards, superintendents, education administrators, principals, supervisors, education consultants, and state legislators.

Such understanding is significant for school board members in that boards of education may come to reflect upon and understand better their role in balancing the interests of states and individuals as they make education decisions that affect the future worth of citizens, the unique cultural development of schools as well as the course and direction of future progress of our schools and our nation. With regard to understanding significant areas of learning and the quality of interactions exhibited by school boards, superintendents may come to reflect upon historical precedents which frame present and future interactions between those mandated and charged with control and management and those delegated the charge of superintendence. Education administrators involved in the pre- and in-service preparation of school practitioners may be provided better information as they continue to provide leadership training in key school functions for superintendents, principals, supervisors and other school officials who must work in concert with school boards in affecting necessary changes. Consultants may be called into reflection as they plan, organize, and key training and in-services with a greater regard for the unique histories of school boards and school boards' valued areas of learning and interaction. Legislatures may come to appreciate the value of building partnerships within school districts as well as among school districts as they attempt to re-establish a more progressive and effective system of education in all states.

The fact that control and management of schools is vested at the local level in the legal and policy making functions of local school boards who are elected from popularly held elections sets the

stage for reflecting upon the quality of learning in key school areas for school board members who need and desire better information to make quality decisions to better serve the needs of schools as societal institutions.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of this study is to determine whether school boards from reform states differ from school boards from nonreform states. The objectives of the study were to describe school board members based on the perceptions of school board presidents and to explain differences between school board presidents from reform and nonreform states in the central region based on learning areas, sources, group dimensions, and other demographics such as district wealth, district size, and school board size.

The selected attributes used to describe school board members were race, age, education level, income, gender, learning sources, and issues of greatest concern. School boards from reform and non reform states do not differ with respect to these selected characteristics. What was found with respect to these selected characteristics is that:

- Over 78% of all school board members in the school boards represented are white, 15.9% Native American, 4.3% black, 0.8% Hispanic, and 0.1% Asian-American;
- Over 67% of all school board members are between the ages of 36 and 50;
- School board members are well-educated with 69% having more than a high school education;
- School board members are fairly well-off with 72.6% being described as having incomes between $20,000 and $59,000;
- Over 31% of all school board members are women;
- School board members learn to do their jobs primarily from the district superintendent (34.1%) or on the job (22.9%); and
- School board presidents are interested more in learning how to do their jobs (43%) and the impact of reform (31.9%) than they are about group relations (25.1%).

While it has been noted that 57% of all board members learn to do their jobs from the superintendent and on the job, this study was also designed to determine whether school board members from reform and nonreform states differed in areas of learning. Differences between school board presidents were also sought based o legal areas of learning, sources, group dimensions, district wealth, district size, and school board size. In this regard, it was found that:

- School boards in reform states are more inclined to acknowledge legal areas of learning as necessary for making effective school board decisions and less inclined than school boards in nonreform states to seek training.
- No significant differences were found between reform and nonreform school boards with respect to learning, group relations, educational reform, district wealth, district size, or school board size.

Conclusions

With regard to the first research question-*What is the social composition of school board presidents?*-it was found that:

- The majority of school boards in the central region are white; between the ages of 36 and 50; are well-educated; financially well-off; and most are men.

With regard to the second research question–*Do school board presidents from reform and nonreform states differ with regard to issues of greatest concern in the areas of learning group relations and education reform?*–it was found that school board presidents from reform and nonreform states do not differ significantly in these areas. Board presidents indicate that they learn to do their jobs from the superintendent and/or on the job; and

are concerned more about doing their jobs than they are about specific issues regarding educational reform or getting along with other board members.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, recommendations are provided for school board members, superintendents, legislators, and other school personnel in an effort to improve school board functioning as these lay school personnel make key decisions to effect management and control of educational change now and in the future.

School Boards

1. It is recommended that school boards continue to avail themselves of the ever growing volume of legal learning being mandated by state legislators.

2. It is recommended that school boards which are not members of state school board associations (SBAs) become affiliated and participate in the training sessions these support agencies offer.

3. For boards which are members of SBAs, it is recommended that more indepth knowledge about key areas of concern be sought and shared with other school board members.

4. For all school board members, it is recommended that efforts be made to improve the quality of board member interaction thereby improving the quality of decisions being made in public settings.

5. Moreover, it is recommended that more women and minorities be recruited and socialized into the ranks of school board membership.

Superintendents

To superintendents seeking and/or holding executive positions to lay school boards:

1. It is recommended that an instructional posture be assumed to provide school board members with the necessary on-the-job skills training so that quality decisions may be based on good and relevant information.

2. For those seeking positions or presently working in reform states, training for school boards is a high priority.

3. For those in nonreform states, a review of legal codes and responsibilities become a key part of superintendent-board interaction.

Legislators

It is recommended that legislators actively seek input from local school boards as well as SBAs when proposing and/or enacting reform legislation. Too many local boards, who have the responsibility for implementing educational change are lacking in knowledge about the intent of legislation and/or the scope of crisis that precipitates certain reform activities. Eliciting advance support from school board members may do much to allay negative perceptions about mandates especially those without funding.

Other School Personnel

Other school personnel must be better informed about the unique role of school boards in managing and controlling proposed educational changes. It is recommended that school staff be informed not only of the prescriptions of school law but also of the law's intent and their own unique role and expected participation in educational reform efforts.

Summary

While school boards act as agencies of the state and are created and designed to operate at the pleasure of state legislators, they should not be ignored as new mandates are developed and prescriptions handed down. Failure to involve school boards in this critical decision making process is to place the entire educational enterprise at further risk for failure. Lay control of public schools remains an American ideal, therefore, steps must be taken to ensure that these lay persons have the necessary information, knowledge, and skills to make decisions which are in the best interests of America's diverse and unique school age populations.

As prescriptions of law become less general and more specific, so must the school board member's knowledge about educational governance. The recruitment process, a major determinant of board member competence, must be expanded to include a knowledge and skills component focusing on the functional areas of schooling and group processes. Only then can school board members be expected to be held accountable for the quality of their decisions, called upon to address prevailing ideological issues, and challenged to acquire the necessary knowledge to effectively govern and manage the educational enterprise as it embarks on restructuring and change.

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